

We need Net Neutrality as evidenced by this article to prevent corporate censorship of individual free speech online something AT&T opposes and could be in even greater danger if their T Mobil USA merger is allowed. Corporate censorship whether its AOL censoring DearAOL.com emails protesting their proposed email fee for prioritized email delivery that evades spam filters, AT&T censoring Pearl Jam which this article is about, or Verizon Wireless censoring text messages from NARAL Pro Choice America. If the FCC won't reclassify broadband under Title II the FTC should regulate Net Neutrality, also the DOJ should investigate corporations engaging in such corporate censorship and if they are violating competition laws break them up.

Pearl Jam came out in favor of net neutrality after AT&T censored a broadcast a performance they did in Chicago last Sunday. I guess AT&T didn't like Pearl Jam's anti-Bush message.

I don't know if Pearl Jam's sudden embrace of net neutrality is out of ignorance, or if it's retaliation. It doesn't really matter because it should help bring some more awareness to the issue. Here's the issue with net neutrality, in a nutshell. AT&T wants to charge companies like Amazon, eBay, and Google when people like you and me access their web pages. And if the companies don't pay, AT&T will make the web sites slower. The idea is that if one company doesn't pay the fees but a competitor does, AT&T customers will probably opt to use the faster services. IT'S WORTH NOTING: Without content, an Internet connection has no value.

Proponents say AT&T built the infrastructure, so they have the right to charge whoever uses it.

There are two problems with that logic.

They're already paying to use it.

When a company decides to go online, they buy an Internet connection. That connection might be owned by AT&T, or it might be owned by some other provider. It isn't cheap. While a 1.5-megabit cable modem connection might cost a consumer \$30, a commercial-grade 1.5-megabit T1 connection will cost more on the order of \$500 a month. A company like Google needs a lot more than one of these connections. Google most likely is spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions, every month for the privilege of being on the Internet.

Without content, an Internet connection has no value.

AT&T knows nothing about how online services work, because they haven't been in the business long. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to go online, you didn't use the Internet unless you were a college student. You subscribed to a service like AOL or Compuserve or Prodigy, who sent you a disk and a local phone number that you called with your modem, and then when you wanted to go online,

you connected to their service. It had e-mail and forums and downloads and news, kind of like the Internet does today, but it was smaller. You could interact with other subscribers but that was pretty much it. E-mail was limited, for the most part, to other members of the same service.

CompuServe was the biggest and most expensive service, but it survived because it had the most features. AOL and Prodigy survived because they were easy to use. GENie, a competing service operated by General Electric, survived primarily because it was cheaper than the others. Each had a niche. In these cases, the company providing access also provided the content. It was a closed system.

The Internet is an open system. AT&T isn't providing all of the content. AT&T is my Internet provider, and I never touch any of their content, except when my credit card expires and I get a new one and I have to go to att.com to update my account with the new expiration date for my automatic bill-pay.

If it weren't for the companies like eBay and Amazon and Google, nobody would want an Internet connection in the first place, because without those providers, an Internet connection is pretty much useless. The only reason the Internet took off in the first place was because companies like AOL and CompuServe couldn't offer services that were as good as what Google and Amazon and eBay.

That's why AOL went from a blue-chip stock to a drag on Time-Warner's share price in less than a decade.

People buy Internet connections so they can use Google and Amazon and eBay. Very few people care about the mostly sterile content AT&T puts on the Internet. I'm sure some people enjoy watching concerts in the AT&T blue room, but I've never heard of anyone watching anything there. But I hear every day about what someone bought or sold on eBay, or a story that showed up on Google News or CNN.com, or a book someone bought on Amazon.

And when they use e-mail, people increasingly are using e-mail from Google or Yahoo or Microsoft instead of the one from their Internet provider. That way they can read their mail anywhere, and they can keep their e-mail address even if they move or change Internet providers. So Internet providers aren't even the primary source of the most basic services anymore.

If anything, AT&T should be paying the companies that produce the content. Not the other way around.

AT&T isn't selling content. It's selling a pipe that content travels to. Lest AT&T get a big head, all AT&T has to offer is plumbing.

So what does this have to do with censorship?

Net neutrality has very little to do with censorship. I suppose someone with contrarian views operating a blog on a shoestring who can't afford to pay for both an Internet connection and the privilege of running in AT&T's fast lane is a victim of a form of censorship. Or if Google doesn't pay to be in the fast lane but Yahoo does, then in a way Google is being censored in favor of Yahoo.

But if AT&T chooses to drop the audio out of a Pearl Jam concert, net neutrality isn't going to stop that. In that case, AT&T is the provider, not just the company providing the plumbing.

But net neutrality is a good thing because without it, what's going to happen is higher prices for the things you buy on Amazon and eBay, and less content on news sites because the news providers can't afford as many writers because now they're having to pay AT&T and every other company that sells digital plumbing. You get less, so that Randall Stephenson gets a higher salary and a more attractive stock options.

Stephenson made \$14.6 million last year, before he got promoted to CEO.

I don't think you and I need to make any more sacrifices in order to give this fat cat a bigger raise.